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The African fever mystery

Imagine:

The nation is alarmed when the U. S. Agriculture Department discovers an outbreak of African cattle fever on a ranch near Ocala. The mysterious virus already has been spread into the Midwest by a shipment from the ranch. In following weeks, it appears at four other locations in Florida. The government orders 500,000 cattle slaughtered in an effort to control the spreading disease. Beef production in this country halts. Beef prices in the supermarkets soar and shortages develop.

Later it is learned that the virus causing the exotic cattle disease was furnished by Fidel Castro to the terrorists who brought it to this country.

The country is outraged. The germ attack is described as an act of war by angry senators. In the House, members demand that Castro be punished for this barbaric assault.

THAT STORY is totally imaginary — except that the Long Island newspaper Newsday has reported that the same thing happened in reverse. CIA officials gave at least tacit approval to the passing of a package of African swine fever virus to anti-Castro terrorists at an Army and CIA base in Panama, the newspaper said. The virus was smuggled into Cuba

and is believed to have caused an outbreak of African swine fever in 1971 that forced the killing of 500,000 pigs and stopped all production of pork, a staple in the Cuban diet.

In other times, we would have found it impossible to believe such a story. Yet Newsday is a reliable and distinguished newspaper. Its reporters unraveled the story with numerous interviews over four months. They talked to the intelligence agent who gave the virus to the anti-Castro group. They talked to a crewman on the trawler that helped make the transfer. After other documented misdeeds by the CIA, it's possible to believe almost anything about the agency.

REPAIRING that loss of credibility by the CIA is the major challenge facing Theodore Sorensen, Jimmy Carter's choice to become the next director. The congressional committees charged with overseeing the activities of the intelligence agency can help, too.

For a start, the committees should investigate the CIA role in the Cuban outbreak of African swine fever. If indeed the CIA as recently as 1971 was behind such an atrocity, responsibility for it should be fixed publicly.